1991

Narrative and thematic tension in the work of Zora Neale Hurston

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Order Number 1344288

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San Jose State University, 1991

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NARRATIVE AND THEMATIC TENSION IN THE WORK OF ZORA NEALE HURSTON

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

By

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May, 1991

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ABSTRACT

NARRATIVE AND THEMATIC TENSION
IN THE WORK OF ZORA NEALE HURSTON

by Judith Anne Lopez

Throughout the work of Zora Neale Hurston there is a noticeable degree of both thematic and narrative tension. Critics such as H. Nigel Thomas, Mary Jane Lupton, Ancilla Coleman, and Henry Louis Gates explain the narrative and thematic tension in Hurston's work either by reading her canon as a synthesis of cultural values or by extracting supposed universal themes and values at work in a given novel. This criticism often fails because narrative and thematic tension in the work of Hurston is not only unresolvable, but in fact integral to the issues of cultural and gender differentiation explored in these works. An examination of the narrative and thematic tension in Jonah's Gourd Vine, Their Eyes Were Watching God, and Seraph on the Suwanee and the criticism addressing these novels illustrates Hurston's ability to explore issues of cultural and gender disparity and posit their ultimate irresolution.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Margo Hendricks, to whom I am greatly indebted, for her intelligence, wit, patience, and most of all, her always available shoulder. In addition, I would like to thank Drs. Aldon Nielsen and John Pollock for their time and interest in this project.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Throughout the work of Zora Neale Hurston there is a noticeable degree of both thematic and narrative tension. This tension is the result of the proximity of Western and non-Western values in the novel. Much of the secondary criticism dealing with her canon is an attempt to circumvent or normalize this tension. Critics such as H. Nigel Thomas, Mary Jane Lupton, and Ancilla Coleman explain the narrative and thematic tension in Hurston's work either by reading her canon as a synthesis of cultural values or by extracting supposed universal themes and values at work in a given novel. This criticism often fails because narrative and thematic tension in the work of Hurston is not only for the most part unresolvable, but also integral to the issues of cultural and gender differentiation explored in these works.

One critical text that proves more willing to consider issues of narrative tension directly in both Hurston's and other African-American novels (most notably the work of Ishmael Reed, Ralph Ellison and Alice Walker) is Henry Louis Gates's The Signifying Monkey. This work is particularly useful for its initial observations of narrative tension. However, Gates believes that Hurston's work ultimately achieves a synthesis of Western and non-Western values in

the narrative scheme of her novels, which it does not. In fact, the inability to rectify disparate cultural values smoothly is the main topic of narrative and thematic discussion in the Hurston canon.

In the first chapter of The Signifying Monkey, Gates suggests that the African god Esu is an appropriate symbol of the African literary tradition and the criticism that must accompany it. Esu, as represented in sculpture, is a double-mouthed, double-gendered messenger/translator/liaison between the gods and man (Gates 3-43). Signification by African-American authors, as Gates explains it, becomes an expression of this double-voice. Gates explains this process using the blues as an analogy:

> When a musician "signifies" beat, he is playing the upbeat into the down beat of the chorus, implying their formal relationship by merging the two structures together to create an ellipsis of the downbeat. The downbeat, then, is rendered present by its absence. Signifyin(g) disappoints these expectations. This form of disappointment creates a dialogue between what the listener expects and what the artist plays. (123)

Signification, thus, becomes an act of revision that recalls established language and conventions at the same time that it alters, revises and comments on the original convention.

Meaning lies not only in the conventions employed in a novel, but also in that combination of the language, symbol, conventions and myths at work in the novel, and its corresponding revisions.

Gates goes on to note that there are several levels of Signification and that one must be careful not to define this technique too narrowly. Critics frequently refer to the tradition of the "dozens" as synonymous with Signification. However, African-American oral traditions such as the dozens, lying, cajoling, and the trickster's ability to talk with great innuendo are merely forms of Signification rather than definitions of the technique itself. According to Gates, any useful definition of the word Signification must conceive the technique, at least in part, as a language of implication or as a technique of indirect argumentation or persuasion (75). In Gates's view, Claudia Mitchell-Kernan comes closest to such a definition:

> Signifying also refers to a way of encoding messages or meanings which involves, in most cases, an element of indirection....This kind of signifying might be best viewed as an alternative message form, selected for its artistic merit, and may occur embedded in a variety of discourse. (80)

What then is the purpose of this indirection? As Gates suggests, "The language of blackness encodes and names its sense of independence through a rhetorical process that we might think of as the Signifyin(g) black difference" (66). Signification, then, can be viewed as the process of personalizing established literary models.

Through the use of Signification, Hurston paradoxically declares both her independence from and her dependence on Western rhetoric and themes, as well as her unity with and her isolation from the African-American community. Signification ultimately places great value on this type of multi-voiced revision. Hurston's ability to signif(y), therefore, facilitates the simultaneous expression of a unique authorial self as well as a shared community voice.

For the purpose of this paper, another important concept to be used in conjunction with Signification is that of "The Speakerly Text." Gates defines the speakerly text as:

> a text whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition, designed to emulate the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical patterns of actual speech and produce the illusion of oral narration. (181)

Gates argues that throughout the history of African-American

literature authors have been concerned with the possibilities of representing the speaking black voice in writing (170-171). African-American authors have largely been concerned with what role an "authentic" black voice would or could assume in African-American literature. Therefore, it follows that the search for authorial voice or point of view becomes a major consideration in this literary tradition.

Through the use of free indirect discourse, Gates believes Hurston achieves a synthesis of this attempt to deal with black oral tradition on one hand and received but not yet fully appropriated standard English on the other. According to Gates, there are three forms of narration to express the words or thoughts of a character:

The first is direct discourse:

"Jody," she smile up at him, "but s'posin-"

"Leave de s'posin' and everything else to me."

The next is indirect discourse:

> "The vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree, but Janie didn't know how to tell Nanny that."

The third is free indirect discourse:

> Joe Starks was the name, yeah Joe Starks from in and through Georgy. Been workin' for white folks all his

> life. Saved up some money-round three hundred dollars, yes indeed, right her in his pocket. Kept hearing' 'bout them buildin' a new state down heah in Floridy and sort of wanted to come. (210)

In free indirect discourse the character's words and thoughts become intertwined with the narrator's. According to Gates, free indirect discourse is a bivocal utterance, containing elements of both direct and indirect speech.

Theoretical suggestions aside, Gates's reading of Hurston's canon neglects the concept of a bivocal utterance and searches for a single voice that synthesizes Western and non-Western speech. Although Gates does acknowledge Janie, the main character of Their Eyes Were Watching God, as a divided-self, he underestimates the struggle of this division in the narrative scheme. Free indirect discourse, as he suggests, is a type of synthesis, but Gates neglects the frequent episodes throughout Hurston's canon when the use of free indirect discourse is impossible. These incidents suggest that the synthesis that Gates observes is rare; it is rare because, like Eurocentric and African-American culture and values, Standard English and Black vernacular are often difficult to reconcile. Hence, the most pronounced feature of Hurston's work becomes narrative and thematic tension rather than narrative synthesis. This

narrative tension becomes not just a conflict between the "inside and outside of things" (184) (Janie's struggle between her two selves) as Gates suggests, but a struggle between the cultural values of a largely Eurocentric America and those of the African-American community.

Finally, apart from a few brief comments, Gates's own analysis of Hurston's novels neglects the way in which gender further complicates such discursive considerations. We need only look at the first page of Their Eyes Were Watching God to understand the importance of gender considerations in Hurston's work. An examination of the narrative and thematic tension in Jonah's Gourd Vine, Their Eyes Were Watching God, and Seraph on the Suwanee and the criticism addressing these novels illustrates Hurston's ability to explore issues of cultural and gender disparity and posit their ultimate irresolution.

Chapter 2

Jonah's Gourd Vine

From the onset of her first novel, Jonah's Gourd Vine, it is obvious that Zora Neale Hurston is concerned with both the written representation of African-American vernacular and the issue of cultural disparity in a broader thematic sense. A number of critics have noted this inherent tension or collision of dissimilar cultural values primarily in the character of John Pearson. However, the occasional critical study of this novel appears content either to dwell on universal models at work in the text, thereby underestimating the complexity of this volatile collision, or to describe contributing features of the conflict without regard for historical specificity. These readings are aided in this endeavor by the critics' willingness to ignore the presence of a similar collision or tension at work in supporting characters of the novel. For example, H. Nigel Thomas's analysis seems to suggest that the identification of folk models in the work of Hurston is the foregone conclusion of any study which deals with this novel. While it is quite true that Hurston uses the folk model of the Black Preacher as Thomas suggests, the revision of this model is of greater significance than the model itself. The Black Preacher folk character is only a means by which the

problems of cultural identity are raised.

Issues of cultural differentation become even more complicated when the folk model undergoes revision. In essence, the model itself raises more questions than it answers. The difficulties of a fusion between Western and African cultures suggested by Hurston's use of the Black Preacher folk character find revision and amplification in the supporting characters of Jonah's Gourd Vine. A look at the revision of this model in these characters and the pervading narrative vacillation uncovers the way in which text is ambivalently implicated in the problematic cultural identity which has existed specifically for African-Americans since the antebellum, and for non-European minorities at large since Europeans came to America. Hurston's attempt to fuse Western and African cultures reveals that oppositions are not easily reconciled. There can be no dream amalgamation, only regrettable compromise.

Jonah's Gourd Vine is the story of John and Lucy Pearson, a black preacher and his devoted wife. At the beginning of the novel the character of John is just reaching manhood and still living with his mother and stepfather. The first scene appears to be another in a long line of domestic quarrels between John's mother, Amy, and his stepfather, Ned. John, the offspring of Amy and her

former slavemaster, Alf Pearson, is the source of many of these quarrels. To remove the only other adult male from the household, Ned transfers the custody of John to his "white trash" friends. To prevent this, Amy sends John across the creek to the old plantation. He is hired by Alf Pearson and is able to go to school with the other black children living on and near the old plantation. It is here that John meets Lucy Potts who will become his wife and chief supporter. Despite the disapproval of her parents, Lucy marries John. Soon they have children and John is made foreman at Pearson's place. The women of the community find John irresistible and (though he deeply loves and respects Lucy), he has affairs with other women.

John assaults Lucy's brother because he learns that Bud has taken her wedding bed in payment for money John owes him. The next day the sheriff comes for John. Lucy rushes to court to be with him. Alf Pearson has John released and advises him to leave town before the "night-riders" seek revenge.

John leaves the same evening, seeking work on the railroad. Eventually he comes to love the worksongs, the gaming at night and the women who come on payday. John's travels bring him to the all black town of Eatonville in Orange County, Florida. Impressed by the opportunities that

await him there, John decides to save money and settle there. John promises to send for Lucy when he has saved enough money. Trips to town and visitors, however, defeat John in his attempt to save money, that is until he receives a letter from Lucy. Because he is too embarrassed to write back to her without the promise of sending for her, John borrows money, moves to Eatonville and sends for Lucy. A year has gone by since John has seen his family when they arrive in Eatonville. Knowing that John has been careless financially, Lucy informs him that he will be a carpenter and they will own a home. Much to John's surprise, the carpentry business goes well. The entire community admires Lucy and her efforts to reform John. John, who has been going to church regularly since his arrival in Florida, announces to the congregation that God has called him to preach.

Not surprisingly, John is extremely successful in the pulpit and the church membership increases. Lucy becomes his advisor in all matters, including the subject of his sermons and the internal politics of the congregation. The following years are prosperous ones for the Pearsons. Nevertheless, there is soon another woman. People in the community begin to talk and slowly lose confidence in John as a preacher because of his affair with Hattie Tyson. When

the loss of his pulpit seems imminent, Lucy advises him to preach a sermon which both reveals his strengths and confesses to the apparent weaknesses the congregation has observed. This suggestion works and John retains his pulpit. Unmoved by the community's early concerns, John resumes his affair with Hattie. Lucy, increasingly ill (apparently from lung cancer), complains that John should be looking after his wife and seven children instead of running around with Hattie. In the heat of this argument John strikes Lucy for the first and only time in their relationship. Shaken by his deed, John backs away from her--afraid of her life and of her death. The next day, Lucy dies.

Within three months, much to the disapproval of the congregation, John is married to Hattie. The community openly talks of Hattie's tainted past. The couple fights constantly and John cannot help but compare her to Lucy. The children leave home, the house falls into disrepair and Hattie drinks constantly. John steadily looses the confidence of his congregation. Hattie reports John's stinginess and their quarrels to church officers to create further suspicions against him. Eventually, Hattie begins divorce proceedings and offers John's numerous affairs as evidence. During the divorce trial, John allows no one to

testify on his behalf. He has resigned himself to the fall. John's final sermon becomes his most powerful and many in the congregation beg him to stay--though to no avail.

John eventually moves to Sanford and begins a new life as a handyman. He meets and falls in love with the supportive Sally Lovelace; having prayed for Lucy's return, he sees Sally as this second chance with Lucy. He remains faithful to Sally for some time, yet he is unable to prevent himself from committing an act of indiscretion. As he rushes away from the scene of his shame, he is so angry with himself that he does not see the oncoming train which claims his life.

Hurston says of her characterization:

> I have tried to present a Negro preacher who is neither funny nor an imitation Puritan ram-rod in pants. Just the human being and poet that he must be to succeed in the Negro pulpit. I see a preacher as a man outside of his pulpit and so far as I am concerned he should be free to follow his bent as other men. He becomes the voice of the spirit when he ascends the rostrum. (Jonah 6)

H. Nigel Thomas suggests that the character of John is Hurston's attempt to "show the collision between the animist and puritan tendencies in black American Christianity" (48).

Thomas's evaluation of the character of John as a personification of cultural collision seems appropriate in light of Hurston's comments. His initial observations illustrate an awareness of the tension between culturally determined value systems at work in the novel. However, Thomas, as does Gates, goes on to look for a synthesis of these disparate cultural values.

> With their ancestral roots in Africa, blacks derive from a tradition where priests are wise men totally immersed in the beliefs, traditions, and aspirations of their culture and are mediators between the divine and mortal. In America, the black preacher found that while he was limited to preaching a Christian God and a Christian heaven, the mores of his congregation were a hybridization of those of their white masters and those of their African forefathers. (44)

Granted, the similarities between John Pearson and the Black Preacher tradition, as Thomas suggests, are unmistakable. As is characteristic of the folkloric figure, John is promiscuous and a charismatic speaker. As Thomas points out, the greed and trickery normally associated with this folk character are absent from John's character (44). However, Thomas' evaluation of the mores of the congregation as hybrid is highly idealistic. The word <u>hybrid</u> implies the

blending of two diverse cultures, yet the cultures represented in this novel, though in close proximity, cannot be said to be truly blended. Values from both cultures are present, but they do not merge easily. In fact, their inability to fuse is exactly what creates indecision in the community regarding John's status. These separate values can only give birth to a two-headed monster, and this beast rears its heads throughout the novel.

Like John, the characters of Ned, Lucy and Hattie move from Western values to African values to Western values to African values; and the changes are recognizable and distinct. The characters' values seem to separate like oil and water. There is no idealized melting pot, no matter how much we romanticize it, because the values of the two cultures are largely at odds with each other. Many critics have noted Hurston's ambiguity regarding issues of race: that is, her tendency to at once praise and condemn African-Americans. Jonah's Gourd Vine does seem to suggest that, in some sense, one culture cannot be praised without the condemnation of another.

From the beginning of the novel, it is clear that John's mixed blood is an issue to Ned, his stepfather. John's "yaller"-ness is a vivid and daily reminder of black oppression at the hands of white slave masters. The insult

is painful because it cuts to the very bone of issues regarding the relationship between female ownership and male identity. It is further compounded by the distinction made by slavemasters between house negroes and field negroes. When he's in his own home, Ned has the freedom to comment openly on his hate for whites, but as Amy observes when he's out with his white friends, he will bow to their will and their opinions: "Beasley told yuh tuh leave hit in his barn and being he's uh white man you done whut he told yuh" (17). Ned is required, as are other members of the black community, to role-play. He must be one thing to the African-American community and another thing to the white community.

Lucy too is required to wear various masks. However, in comparison to Ned, Lucy has a greater ability to make these roles work for her. In the beginning of the novel, Western ways seem to dominate Lucy's characterization. As a child Lucy wears clothes like those of white children; she is from a family that lives according to the standards and mores of white people; and she has earned extremely high marks in a school where "Negro children go to learn how to read and write like white folks" (30). When John first comes across the creek, he sees the children at the schoolhouse and feels ashamed of his bare feet for the first

time in his life:

> How was he to know that there were colored folks that went around with their feet cramped up like white folks. All were looking a little bit like women-all but the little back-eyed one. When he looked back into her face he felt ashamed. Seemed as if she had caught him doing something nasty. (31)

Throughout the novel, there are constant references to Lucy's small size. When she gives birth to her first daughter, John comments that the baby is almost as large as she is. John continually picks Lucy up and cradles her like a baby. Like the children "with their feet cramped up like white folks" (31), Lucy's entire body is bound by white morality and culture. Yet, the knowledge that white morality has been accepted by the middle-class congregation of Eatonville enables her to counsel John on the politics of the church and to help him preserve his pulpit.

Despite the overwhelming appearance of white manners and mores, Lucy also displays a mysticism not associated with the discipline of this middle class culture. Before he even learns her name, Lucy has a mysterious power over John; she is the black-eyed girl he immediately notices upon his arrival. Early in the novel, seeing him gaze at Lucy, Pheemy, John's grandmother, asks him if he's all right. He

sees the "black eyes of the little girl in the school yard burned at him from out of the darkness and he [says] 'Wisht Ah could go tuh school tuh' (42). Other indications of Lucy's mysticism are found throughout the novel. For example, when she reaches Florida Lucy feels at home because the climate is more in tune with her African spirituality:

> Lucy sniffed sweet air laden with night-blooming jasmine and wished that she had been born in this climate. She seemed to herself to be coming home. This was where she was meant to be. The warmth, the foliage, the fruits all seemed right and as God meant her to be surrounded. The smell of ripe guavas was new and alluring but somehow did not seem strange. (176)

As Lucy grows older she seems to draw more and more on this mystical spirituality. When she gives birth to her daughter Isis, John comments that the baby's eyes convey a wisdom. Lucy replies, "Ah toted de rest uh de chillun in mah belly, but dat one wuz bred in mah heart. She bound to be diffunt" (187). When Lucy is near death, John cannot face her eyes, the same eyes that she has passed on to her daughter:

> After that look in the late watches of the night John was afraid to be alone with Lucy. His fear of her kept him from his bed at night. He was afraid lest she

> should die while he was asleep and he should awake to find her spirit standing over him. In all his struggles of sleep, the large bright eyes looked thru and beyond him and saw too much. (210)

The night Lucy's body is shrouded,

> a wind arose about the house and blew from the kitchen wall to the clump of oleanders that screened the chicken house, from the oleanders to the fence paling and back again to the house wall, and the pack of dogs followed it, rearing against the wall, leaping and pawing the fence, howling, barking and whining until the break of day, and John huddled beneath his bed-covers shaking and afraid. (213)

The closer Lucy comes to death, the more she embodies this mystic spirituality. In the end, like Ned, Lucy must play cultural roles which are separate and often conflicting, alternating between the behavior associated with the prim and proper white middle class, and mystic behavior distinctly as odds with this culture.

Like Lucy and Ned, Hattie Tyson also has the ability to change cultural masks. However, Hattie seems to have a greater manipulative gift for role-playing than any other character in the novel. She seems to move from African spirituality to more conventional western moral techniques

in her maneuvers with John. In the beginning of the novel, Hattie is merely mentioned. However, this chapter is devoted to Dangie Dewoe's voodoo rituals and efforts to help Hattie get John to return to her after a period of nine weeks through spiritual means. Shortly after Lucy's death, John and Hattie are married but it is never smooth sailing. Throughout the frequent brawls the couple has, she always goes back to Dangie for guidance. Ultimately, when the issue becomes a contest between Hattie's desire for a new pair of shoes and John's desire for a headstone for Lucy, Hattie turns not to Dangie, but to the church elders. She uses the Christian morality of the church congregation to destroy John's position in the community. Regarding her divorce, Hattie is counseled by Deacon Harris:

> Yo kin pick uh fight outa Sister Beery uh Gertie Burden, can't uh? Dat'll th'ow de fat in de fiah, and bring eve'ything out in de day light, and when iss all over wid, he'll be uh lost ball in the high grass. Ah sick and tiahed uh all dess so-called no-harm sins. (242)

Hattie rouses the western morality of the church and is successful in her bid to remove John from the pulpit. Yet, John's final sermon reminds the congregation of his speaking power and they reconsider keeping him on. However, by this

time, John has been humiliated by the court proceedings and only wants to leave town to make a new life for himself.

Although the tension between cultural values is most evident in Hurston's characterizations, the issue of cultural tension is not limited to characterization alone. The narrative technique is also a participant in the uneasy attempt to merge Western and African-American cultures. Throughout the novel, the omniscient narrator acts as a guide to the reader. Unlike the occasional episodes of free indirect discourse found in Their Eyes Were Watching God, the narrative diction of Jonah's Gourd Vine swings back and forth from explanation to dialogue. The language in the former is western and in the latter, African-American, Southern vernacular. Interestingly, there is no attempt to merge these disparate cultures in a narrative sense. Through this constant shifting, it becomes evident that the intended reader of the novel is not expected to be a member of the novel's community.

> "'Tain't gwine rain," he snorted, "you always talin' more'n yuh know."
>
> Just then a few heavy drops spattered the hard clay yard. He arose slowly. He was an older middle-age than his years gave him right to be.
>
> "And eben if hit do rain," Ned Crittenden concluded

> grudgingly, "ef dey ain't got sense 'nough tuh come in let 'em git wet". (9)

In fact, the narrator is a translator for readers who are significantly outside the community represented in the novel. In addition, a glossary is provided at the end of the novel (313-316).

The text itself is written about a Southern, African-American community, but its implied readers are those who live outside this community. Ultimately, the narrative format itself becomes implicated in the stormy climate of cultural politics. In this novel, the issue of cultural compromise is clearly important. Nonetheless, for good or ill, in the collision between cultural values, western values take precedence. However, despite the cultural compromises demanded by mainstream America, Hurston's characters convey a wide range of abilities in dealing with such compromise. While John and Ned seem at a loss for control of their complex moral environment, Lucy and Hattie seem to draw power from their ability to manipulate both worlds. Clearly, the female characters in Jonah's Gourd Vine have a greater ability to manipulate both worlds successfully than do the male characters. As Hurston will go on to say in Their Eyes Were Watching God,

> Now, women forget all those things they don't want to

remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly. (9)

Chapter 3

Their Eyes Were Watching God

Unlike Jonah's Gourd Vine, in Their Eyes Were Watching God there are a few attempts to merge vernacular dialogue with standard English narrative in passages of free indirect discourse. However, after these brief episodes, the narration always returns to a constant, un-ending vacillation between Janie's vision, vernacular dialogue, and standard English narration. Free indirect discourse is never truly established as a consistent mode of narration. Instead the narrative voice vacillates, mirroring the theme that runs throughout the novel: Janie's search for a voice. Gates is not alone in his desire to resolve this vacillation. Many critics are uncomfortable with the sense of irresolution Hurston's novel suggests and it is not surprising that most of the critics avoid dealing with this issue, instead of seeing it as a way of engaging the novel. Instead of trying to create a synthesis of disparate elements at work in the novel, critics such as Mary Jane Lupton are content to ignore the overwhelming presence of non-European, gender-specific values and look instead for "universals." As this discussion will illustrate, such studies neglect the cultural confusion represented in the novel through characterization, theme and narrative

vacillation.

Their Eyes Were Watching God is the story of Janie Crawford. The narrative begins when Janie returns to her community after burying her third husband, and she tells the story of her life to her friend Phoeby. Janie is raised by her grandmother Nanny, a former slave. Janie's mother is the result of the relationship between Nanny and her former slave master. Nanny, who had hoped to be a school teacher, attempts to help her daughter become one. However, in the process Janie's mother is raped by a local school teacher, and Janie is the product of this violent act. Janie's mother runs away after Janie's birth and Janie is left to the care of Nanny. Nanny, who works for a white family, raises Janie in the white folks' yard and Janie is six before she even realizes that she is black.

The contemplative episode under the pear tree signals Janie's discovery of womanhood:

> She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was marriage. (Eyes 24)

Through the pollinated air Janie sees Johnny Taylor, whom she knew "in her former blindness" (25) as shiftless Johnny

Taylor, and who will kiss her for the first time. Nanny witnesses this scene and immediately arranges Janie's marriage to an older farmer, Logan Killicks. Nanny believes his sixty acres will provide Janie with the bourgeois security Nanny has come to envy among white folks. Janie waits for love with Killicks but it does not come. When he realizes that she will never love him, he tries to break her spirit by threatening to reduce her to the status of work horse. However, Janie rebels and runs away with Joe Starks, who plans to become an enormous power in the all black community of Eatonville.

Joe Starks not only becomes the mayor of Eatonville, but its visionary. He pampers Janie with all the material possessions Nanny dreamed of. However, he thinks of her as the jewel of a self-made man and denies her any life outside his. He insists that she not pass the time of day with the members of the community who "lie" in front of his general store, believing that as the mayor's wife she has an image to maintain. In addition, he reminds her that as a woman her place is in the home.

After many years of marriage, Joe dies and Janie inherits his property. She then meets and weds Teacake Woods, a gambler and migrant laborer much younger than Janie. Teacake never asks Janie to be anything but herself

and she is encouraged to express herself in every facet of her life. When Teacake asks Janie to work in the fields by his side, she consents because she does not want to be parted from him and because he has asked, not commanded. However, misfortune strikes and Teacake gets bitten by a rabid dog while saving Janie from drowning during a flood. He grows increasingly insane and she must kill him or be killed by Teacake. Upon Teacake's death, Janie returns to her home to tell the story of her life to Phoeby. Janie's journey has come full circle:

> Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.
>
> Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly.
>
> So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from the burying of the dead. Not the dead of the sick and ailing with friends at the pillow and the feet. She had come back from the sodden and the

> bloated; the sudden dead, their eyes flung wide open in judgment. (Eyes 9)

The opening page of Their Eyes Were Watching God takes the reader from a male experience to a female experience to the individual experience of Janie Crawford as she returns home from burying her husband. This narrative vacillation runs throughout the novel and mirrors Janie's recurring search for her voice. In Their Eyes Were Watching God the ability to speak becomes a metaphor for power: the ability to "give name" to experience and to "give name" to oneself. For Janie, and for Hurston, the ability to speak becomes the climax of human development.

Early in the novel the narrative voice shifts from third person omniscient narrator/standard English to the voice of Janie herself. Like Jonah's Gourd Vine, the text itself is ensnared in the issue of cultural identity. The narration alternates between translator and subject, depicting the rival interests of two cultures. However, Janie is only allowed to become the narrator for a brief period of time. This shift temporarily gives Janie control over the ordering of her experiences. She molds and shapes events to tell her story and to give a name to herself. As she says to Phoeby, "Dey useter call me Alphabet 'cause so many people had done named me different names" (21).

Telling her story becomes Janie's chance to name herself. Nevertheless, Janie is not the only voice in this novel, and her story is told by many narrators.

The power of words is made clear early in the novel. After Janie's momentous experience under the pear tree, the reader is told that "Nanny's words made Janie's kiss across the gatepost seem like a manure pile after a rain" (27). One of the most powerful moments in Janie's growing consciousness is transformed by Nanny's words to nothing more than manure. Nanny herself acknowledges speech as power with her longing to have been an African-American feminist preacher: "Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sitting on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me" (32). Nanny longs to tell her own story, to affect her own myth.

The absence of speech marks the failure of Janie's first marriage--"Long before the year was up, Janie noticed that her husband had stopped talking in rhymes to her" (46). It is at this point that Janie meets Joe Starks, and once again, the power of speech is evident:

> But when he heard all about 'em makin' a town all outa colored folks, he knowed dat was deplace he wanted to be. He had always wanted to be a big voice, but de white folks had all de sayso where he come from and

> everywhere else, exceptin' dis place dat colored folks was buildin' theirselves. (48)

When Janie and Joe reach Eatonville, it is clear that the town is not as progressive as they had anticipated. However, Joe quickly transforms it and his power to do so is greatly enabled by his speaking skills. In contrast, Janie immediately acquires a reputation for being silent: "There was a long dead pause. Janie was not jumping at her chance like she ought to. Look like she didn't hardley know he was there. She need waking up" (61). This prompts a man in the town to comment to her, "Folks must be mighty close-mouthed where you come from" (61).

As part of his transformation of the city, Joe plans a town meeting. People come from miles around and Joe gives a rousing speech on the future of Eatonville. It is decided right then and there that he will be mayor "until we kin see further" (69). At this point, one of the townspeople calls for "uh few words uh encouragement from Mrs. Mayor Starks" (69). Joe quickly interjects, "Thank yuh fuh yo' compliments, but mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home" (69). Janie is consumed by a cold feeling, and it is clear that with this denial of voice Joe attempts to transform her into nothing

more that the possession of a man of means. At the close of this meeting, Joe "strode along invested with his new dignity, thought and planned out loud, unconscious of her thoughts" (70).

This denial of voice is never more obvious than when people collect in front of Joe's store and indulge in "mule talk" or "lying." Janie works in the store and hears and enjoys these stories with regularity: "Janie loved the conversation and sometimes she thought up good stories on the mule, but Joe had forbidden her to indulge" (85). "Lying," as both Thomas and Gates note, is an essential exchange in the African-American community's cultural development (30, 190). It is this exchange that allows the individual to signif(y) or transform community experience into individual declaration. Joe denies Janie this essential developmental technique because of her class; she is the mayor's wife and therefore higher in stature than the other members of the community. Janie's life goes on in this way for several years. Eventually, when Joe falls ill to kidney disease, Janie uses this opportunity finally to speak her mind to her husband:

> But Ah ain't goin' outa here and Ah ain't gointuh hush. Naw, you gointuh listen tuh me one time befo' you die. Have yo' way all yo' life, trample and mash down and

> then die ruther than tuh let yo'self heah 'bout it. Listen, Jody [Joe], all dis bowin' down, all dis obedience under your voice-dat ain't whut Ah rushed off down de road tuh find out about yuh. (133,134)

The first time Janie really talks, and presumably the first time Joe really listens, coincides with his immediate death. Words are power.

Janie's relationship with Teacake Woods is also distinguished by the issue of speech. She loves Teacake because he wants her to be nothing more than herself. It is during this period that Janie finally begins to discover her voice. Coincidentally, she finds it on the store porch that Joe had once denied her access to: "Only here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest" (226). However, despite this growing community interaction, Janie remains outside the community. At the end of the story, the women of the community would rather talk about Janie than talk to Janie. She passes on the story of her life to Phoeby alone. She must in some sense abandon the desire to be part of the community for her own sense of individuality and freedom; even though, paradoxically, she continues to embrace many of the community's values and traditions.

It is this sense of paradox, of narrative vacillation, and of irresolution which creates confusion about the text. In a desire to resolve those issues which Hurston intends to remain unresolved, critics such as Mary Jane Lupton attempt to order the novel through artificial, culturally specific models. For example, Lupton states that "no woman in fiction exhibits so strongly as Janie those strengths associated with the Homeric epic hero: bravery, the completion of a voyage, the endurance of trials, mastery in battle, acceptance in the community, self-definition, survival" (48). Lupton then goes on to say, that "... for Hurston and for Homer, survival is the major concern" (48). In essence, Lupton asks the reader to view an African-American female literary character through the lens of a strictly Eurocentric and masculine perspective.

Lupton recognizes that female bildungsroman are few. Nonetheless, in an attempt to remedy this, she comes armed only with the European male bildungsroman as a model and attempts to forge Janie's journey from this model without regard for cultural or sexual specificity. Easy models such as Lupton suggests ignore the paradox and thematic and narrative tension woven throughout the novel. A major aspect of what Hurston reveals in her use and adaptation of myth, is such a model's inability to illustrate both black

and feminine experience effectively without alteration. As Addison Gayle notes, "the black man cannot find his identity in the cultural artifacts of the Western world" (131). Similarly, a woman cannot find her identity in the duplication of a male's life. Their Eyes Were Watching God is far more complicated than Lupton's reading suggests. Changing the name of the main character and giving her a hoe instead of a sword will not compensate for the cultural and sexual vision of the homeric epic, and yet this is exactly what Lupton implies that Hurston has done. In the end, Janie's demons are not as visible as those found in the Odyssey. Her quest is on another level and concerns the complex issues of racial and sexual identity.

Lupton has not chosen this myth because of any similarity it bears to Hurston's work, but because as Jennifer Jordan notes, Lupton wants to see Hurston's work as "proof of female superiority and dominance in a Darwinian world" (109). Lupton cannot see past the existing Homeric model because victory and power are largely defined in Eurocentric America by western masculine standards.

Lupton's argument is also dependent on a belief that critics tend to ignore the violent ending of Janie's last male/female relationship in Their Eyes Were Watching God. Most critics cite Janie's relationship with Teacake as a

relationship that finally gives Janie freedom, self-determination, and equality. The relationship ends when Teacake is bitten by a rabid dog, and in the accompanying madness attacks Janie, who reluctantly shoots him. Lupton contends that most critics ignore the abundant evidence of Teacake's violence throughout the novel. It is true that critics do largely ignore this evidence; yet Lupton also engages in critical neglect. While some critics ignore Teacake's episodes of violence and the violent end to the relationship, Lupton overlooks Janie's own periodic acts of violence and the overwhelming harmony of the relationship. Lupton chooses to ignore the harmonic aspects of this relationship because it would undermine her "all to battle credo."

Most notable in Lupton's reading is her inability to consider fully the sequence of events which lead to Teacake's illness. He is bitten by a snake because he is trying to save Janie's life, not extinguish it. Janie's final act of desperation is an affirmation that when forced to choose between life and death, she will choose life. The obvious harmony of the Teacake/Janie relationship is an unnecessary representation on Hurston's part if the novel, as a whole, is simply a call to battle as Lupton suggests. It is true that despite the soundness of the relationship,

Janie's and Teacake's interests are at one point in conflict, but Hurston is careful to distinguish this conflict from any other in the novel. Janie's decision to choose her life over Teacake's is not symbolic of a woman's battle against a man, but if the instinctive human response to protect one's life when the situation demands it.

To further support her claim, Lupton does a comparative consideration of Their Eyes Were Watching God and a short story entitled "Sweat." Unfortunately, she again treats the works too broadly, drawing only on their similarities and ignoring their very crucial differences. As Lupton argues:

> "Sweat" involves the desolate marriage between a hard-working washer woman, Delia, and her abusive, unfaithful husband, Sykes. Having come to hate his skinny, industrious wife, Sykes brings home a rattlesnake to scare her. Infuriated by her defiance, he puts the snake in Delia's wash basket. Instinctively Delia runs to the hay loft and Sykes, returning home from a night out, is poisoned by the snake. In the last scene Delia lies in the grass, a witness to the accident but unable to assist her husband, her body willed immobile by the force of her hatred. (50)

Although the events may be similar, they are distinctive in

extremely important ways. Teacake does not continually abuse Janie as Sykes so clearly abuses Delia. In addition, Janie does not kill Teacake out of any sense of hatred. Lupton argues, "The wife in both cases not only survives the husband but in effect contributes to his death, passively in Delia's situation and quite actively in Janie's" (50). However, it could certainly be argued that Delia's contribution to Sykes's death is much greater than Janie's to Teacake's. If Janie and Teacake are truly in battle when Janie is drowning as Lupton suggests, why isn't the victor determined at this juncture? Why does Teacake successfully save Janie? Why does he die so much later in the story and after the 'battle'? In Lupton's discussion, all these questions are raised through implication yet immediately abandoned.

The most peculiar oversight is Lupton's disregard for the consciousness of both Janie and Teacake at the time of the flood. They are not at odds as she suggests. In fact, Janie and Teacake share the same concern during the flood: they both fear for Janie's life. Nonetheless, Lupton contends that Teacake's "protective urge results in the male's need to protect the female of the species" (52). This statement suggests that Teacake (the male) kills himself rather than allow Janie (the female) to die. This

nullifies Lupton's earlier suggestion that Janie is actively responsible for Teacake's death and undermines Lupton's premise regarding female victory. Lupton offers conflicting signals about the interests and terms of this 'battle.' On the one hand, Lupton argues that Teacake wants to murder Janie because of a male urge to dominate women; on the other hand, she posits that his effort to save Janie stems from a masculine need to save women. As Jennifer Jordan notes,

> Lupton interprets Tea Cake's death as the result of a sexual war in which the male receives his comeuppance....for her, it is a male/female battle for dominance ending in the destruction of males....Lupton, ignoring the fact that Janie's escape from danger has nothing to do with her own abilities,....sees Janie as a model of some Neanderthal notion of manhood and believes that she must draw blood before she can become a real woman. (109)

Ultimately, it is difficult to believe that the main character in a novel with obvious feminist sympathies would carry out traditional aspects of male revenge.

In choosing to compare Their Eyes Were Watching God with the Homeric model, Lupton has a pre-fabricated framework, and whatever textual examples and supporting data she can bend she fits into the framework and discards any

remaining unyielding facts. Unfortunately, this method reduces Hurston's intricate female characterizations to cartoon replicas of Amazon women, and reveals more about the direction feminism should go according to Lupton than the complexity of gender and cultural relations documented by Hurston. Such a practice illustrates critical discomfort regarding the intentional irresolution of Hurston's texts.

Chapter 4

Seraph on the Suwanee

Similar to Their Eyes Were Watching God, Hurston's Seraph on the Suwanee is both thematically and narratively concerned with the main character's voice. Like Their Eyes Were Watching God, the main character struggles to unite separate cultural values, but with little success. However, while Their Eyes Were Watching God is a chronicle of the development of voice, Seraph on the Suwanee becomes a chronicle of its decline. All characters in the novel, particularly the main character, Arvay, must transform their interests and behavior to adapt to a social climate which values them in very specific roles. As in Hurston's other work, the narrative scheme mirrors the thematic scheme. Like Their Eyes Were Watching God, there is more than one narrator in Seraph on the Suwanee. The representation of class as well as culture in this novel illustrates an additional problem with Gates's reading which concerns itself exclusively with the representation of black vernacular in writing. A consideration of the textual expression of vernacular must be expanded to consider the representation of any vernacular in writing. This theoretical expansion makes it possible to realize the way in which all voices in Seraph on the Suwanee, especially Arvay's, acquiesce to the interests of a rigid and

established social structure.

As with Their Eyes Were Watching God and Jonah's Gourd Vine, the criticism of Seraph on the Suwanee largely functions to normalize Arvay's transformation. For example, using psychologist Erich Neumann's reading of the mythic Psyche character, Ancilla Coleman's study reads Arvay's transformation as a tale of growing sexual maturity rather than as a story of social and sexual repression. Studies such as Coleman's tend to neglect important social realities in Hurston's work in an attempt to order artificially the apparently chaotic but in actuality diverse environment represented in the novel.

In the beginning of the novel, Arvay, a religious white backwoods girl, is courted by Jim Meserve, a voice of the new south and her eventual husband. Arvay discourages his advances as she has all other suitors. Nonetheless, he arrives at each encounter prepared for battle. With each successive encounter, the reader is given an extensive description of Arvay's inner life only to have Arvay's feelings overpowered and dismissed by Jim's juxtaposed statements. As the narrator states,

> They had no way of knowing that Arvay was timid from feeling unsafe inside....Arvay had never told anyone how she felt and why. (Seraph 8)

However, the subsequent change in narrative voice from

standard english to backwoods southern vernacular indicates that the reader is privilege to Arvay's most private thoughts. Jim constantly dismisses this inner life, and in fact believes that it is his responsibility to "stay with [Arvay] and stand by [her] and give [his] good protection to keep [her] from hurting [her] ownself too much" (15). The narrative scheme mirrors this dismissal. When Arvay is alone, the episodes of narrative description marked with her voice (written in backwoods vernacular) dramatically increase. With the exception of direct dialogue, when Arvay is with Jim, her thoughts and feelings are not expressed in this same voice, but in standard english. This signals the increasing prominence of Jim's point of view in Arvay's voice and the narrative voice of the novel.

Early in their relationship, Jim attempts to make it perfectly clear what he expects from Arvay:

> Women folks don't have no mind to make up nohow. They wasn't made for that. Lady folks were just made to laugh and act loving and kind and have a good man to do for them all he's able, and have him as many boy-children as he figgers he'd like to have, and make him so happy that he's willing to work and fetch in every dad-blamed thing that his wife thinks she would like to have. That's what women are made for. (23)

Still Arvay wonders, what could this handsome, charming,

powerful, visionary want from her and "what in the world did she have to win him with?" (22). Arvay's fears are in part a result of her class. She is constantly reminded that Jim's father is a former plantation owner and she comes from "white trash." Therefore, she doubts her ability to hang on to such a "catch." In addition, she struggles make sense of Jim's values through the myopia of her very different class values. To relieve Arvay's apprehensions Jim says,

> Love and marry me and sleep with me. That is all I need you for. Your brains are not sufficient to help me with my work; you can't think with me. Let's get this thing straight in the beginning. Putting your head on the same pillow with mine is not the same thing as mingling your brains with mine anymore than crying when I cry is giving you the power to feel my sorrow. You can feel my sympathy but not my sorrow. (32-33)

Oddly enough, this does console her. She is relieved to know that,

> if she married Jim Meserve, her whole duty as a wife was to just love him good, be nice and kind around the house and have children for him. She could do that and be more than happy and satisfied, but it looked too simple. (33)

Indeed it is too simple. Arvay's fears really stem from the fact that she has much more to give than she is aware of.

Successive arguments over the course of their marriage stem from Arvay's inability to believe that this is all Jim wants from her, and the accompanying fear of losing him. Jim not only wants her to believe that this is all he truly wants from her, but he also wants her to give up all notion of offering him anything else.

Arvay gives in little by little to all Jim's wishes and as her inner life deteriorates her material life improves. Similarly, Arvay's narrative influence in the text becomes less and less important, even without the immediate presence of Jim. Eventually the episodes of narration marked by backwoods vernacular disappear altogether. Arvay begins to take more and more pleasure in pleasing Jim, and experiences more and more fear at the possibility of disappointing him. One of the most drastic illustrations of her changing concerns takes place when she is pregnant with her third child. Jim jokingly tells Arvay that if the child is not a boy, he will leave her. Arvay does not recognize this as a joke and frets for seven months. She even goes so far as to pray to God to take the child from her if it isn't a boy. When Jim finds out, he first wants to laugh, but is then angry with her. His response is, "What cause have you ever had to doubt me, Arvay? Have I ever mistreated you in any way whatsoever? Have I ever neglected to do my utmost for you and for my children?" (92). Jim departs angrily and

abruptly for the calm of the grove to be alone in his anguish. He believes that there is "not sufficient understanding in his marriage" and that "it could not keep on like this. He was panging and paining far too much" (92). Jim is not without genuine concern for Arvay, but what he fails to realize is that he is problem with his marriage. He contemplates leaving Arvay because she does not understand him. He makes no attempt to understand her anguish, only his own.

Jim's eventual decision not to leave Arvay is a result of his masculine responsibility to provide materially for her and their children. He wonders,

> what would become of the poor weak thing without the proper person to give her the right care? She needed and required the best that the world could afford. She was a woman and women folks were not given to thinking. That was what men were made for. Women were made to hover and to feel. (93)

Arvay too entertains the idea of leaving her spouse, when Jim suggests they place Earl, their increasingly violent son, in professional care. She is so outraged by the suggestion that she leaves with Earl under the pretense of visiting her mother. This separation does not last long. When she arrives at her mother's home, she immediately recognizes the standard of living as much poorer than she

had remembered. Arvay has become accustomed to the life Jim has given her. This reinforces Jim's hold on her. She believes he has truly lifted her in stature. She compromises and leaves Earl with her mother.

Throughout the course of their marriage Arvay continues to acquiesce to Jim's wishes, but not without a struggle. She continues to wonder what Jim truly wants from her and he continually interprets these struggles as her inability to love him. Afterall, that is all she is supposed to do; and if there are confrontations the cause of these conflicts is her inability to love as he understands love. As they approach their late forties, Jim grows tired of these confrontations. He leaves Arvay, promising to provide for her, and tells her she must prove she loves him within a year or lose him forever. Arvay struggles for months with this issue. She loves him--after all he has given her so much--but cannot devise a way to prove it to him. It is not until her mother's death that she finally arrives at the solution.

Just before her mother's death, Arvay visits her mother and is again surprised by the poverty she finds. In addition, Larraine, her sister, and Larraine's husband, Carl, who as a young girl Arvay loved desperately and from afar, are also penniless and have been living off the money Arvay and Jim intended for Arvay's mother. Again, Arvay is

reminded of all Jim has given her. To keep her house from Larraine and Carl prior to her death, Arvay's mother arranges to have the home put in Arvay's name. After her mother's death, Arvay returns to the house with groceries for Larraine and Carl and finds that they have stolen everything from inside the house. Arvay burns down the house, and with it all remaining memories of life without Jim. She is now ready to love in the way Jim has commanded. Jim has demanded Arvay's love on his terms and she must give up her own notions of love to fulfill his wish.

One issue on the periphery of this novel, which nonetheless complicates the issue of social struggle throughout the novel, is the Pet-Negro system. Hurston notes in her satirical essay entitled "The 'Pet' Negro System":

> And every white man shall be allowed to pet himself a Negro. Yea, he shall take a black man unto himself to pet and to cherish, and this same Negro shall be perfect in his sight. Nor shall hatred among the races of men, nor conditions of strife in the walled cities, cause his pride and pleasure in his own Negro to wane. (I Love Myself 156)

Wherever Jim Meserve is, Joe Kelsey can be found by his side. As an extension of Joe, the Kelsey family is also thought of as Meserves. Dessie, Joe's wife, does the wash

and other odd chores for Arvay, Joe's sons help maintain Jim's groves, and the entire family lives in a vacant house on Jim's land. In addition, Kenny, Arvay's and Jim's youngest son, even teaches Belinda, Joe and Dessie's daughter, how to do tricks such as standing on her head, an episode in which the issue of 'pet' could not be more blatantly illustrated. At first Arvay accepts this arrangement:

> Arvay sympathized and understood. Every Southern white man has his pet Negro. His Negro is always fine, honest, faithful to him unto death, and most remarkable. Indeed, there ain't no Negro on earth fitten to hold him a light, and few white people. He never lies, and in fact can do no wrong. If he happens to do what other people might consider wrong, it is never his Negro's fault. (54)

However, despite the enormous amount of work they do, or maybe because of it, Arvay begins to think of Joe and his family as her competition. As her children grow older and more self-sufficient she begins to feels unnecessary. It is the fear of this purposelessness in Jim's world that creates suspicions and fears in her mind regarding Joe's family. Whenever problems arise, she imagines that one of the Kelseys is the source. Eventually, Arvay accuses Joe of having a greater influence over Jim than she does, and

maneuvers the Kelseys off Jim's land.

Like Joe and his family, Arvay has been reduced to "pet" status. As Jim says to Arvay, "Look, Little-Bits, I think as much of you as God does of Gabriel, and you know that's His pet angel" (100). In this new south, like the old south, white women, like blacks, are reduced to supporting members of the "massa's" plantation. In the reconstructive South, women and blacks are socialized to perform tasks: Arvay's job is to coddle Jim and his children, Joe's is to be Jim's friend and most valued manual laborer, and Dessie's is to clean up after Arvay. In addition, they all refer to themselves as Meserves, because in a very real sense, they still belong to a plantation and therefore assume the owner's name. However, Arvay is still a greater beneficiary of the social system that greatly abuses the Kelseys. Again, the narrative scheme mirrors the thematic scheme. Whereas Arvay loses her voice, the Kelseys never truly have voices within the context of the novel.

As previously stated, critical opinion regarding this work suffers from an attempt to normalize thematic and narrative tension. If we only consider the similarities between the myth of Psyche and Arvay's story as Colemen has, we grasp many of the sexual aspects outlined by Neumann, but none of the social issues that Hurston is additionally concerned with. A narrow reading such as Colemen undertakes

ignores the importance of social hierarchy in Seraph on the Suwanee, and the main character's struggle not only with her inner sexuality but with the larger gender and class issues at work in the novel.

The character of Arvay in Seraph on the Suwanee comes from a background much lower than that of her husband, Jim Merserve. She is what is commonly referred to in the South as "white trash." Jim is the son of a former plantation owner and a visionary of the "New South." As Coleman notes, Psyche, in Apuleius's Metamorphoses or Golden Ass, also comes from a background lower than her God husband Eros (22). Unlike Psyche, however, Arvay is constantly aware of this difference in social class. Like Psyche, Arvay remains unwed, but not for the same reasons. Psyche's beauty is so profound that she is worshipped as a goddess by her community, and therefore, is unapproachable. In contrast, Arvay's sister has wed the only man Arvay considers suitable for marriage, the Preacher Carl Middleton, so Arvay removes herself from the marriage market and devotes herself to some vague missionary calling. Jim, like Cupid, arrives to save Arvay from a horrible fate. Cupid comes to save Psyche from marriage to a terrible monster, whereas Jim comes to save Arvay from virginity. Both women are taken away from their families and are for the most part isolated in a world their husbands create for them. In Neumann's reading of the tale

he notes:

> Every paradise has its serpent, and Psyche's nocturnal rapture cannot last forever. The intruder, the snake (of this paradise), is represented by Psyches' sisters, whose irruption brings the catastrophe. (70)

He also says that the sisters voice all Psyche's hidden fears (65). Coleman confirms this observation in her reading of Seraph on the Suwanee: "All the negative comments of Psyche's jealous sisters are made by Arvay, for indeed in the myth these sisters voice the unspoken doubts and fears of Psyche herself" (22). Whereas Coleman's observation is undoubtedly true, it is crucial to acknowledge the social as well as sexual aspects of Arvay's fears as opposed to those of Psyche.

Both women throughout their prospective narratives struggle to understand the requests of their husbands. In both cases, this lack of understanding is the catalyst for both Cupid's and Jim's eventual flight from their wives. Eventually, both women are allowed to return to their husbands, however the conditions of their return differ. According to Neumann, Psyche returns to Eros with the knowledge of a more mature love than she has before experienced:

> In the light of her new consciousness, she experiences a fateful transformation, in which she discovers that

> the separation between beast and husband is not valid. With this she departs from the childlike, unconscious aspect of her reality and the matriarchal, man-hating aspect as well. (78)

However, Arvay returns with the knowledge of and the willingness to participate in a patriarchal social that demands her obedience. She becomes a seraph, the highest angel in the celestial hierarchy, and Jim is her God.

Coleman's study is consistent with Neumann's reading of the story. She too draws on what Neumann calls the psychic development of the feminine (57). Admittedly, there are many similarities between the stories of Psyche and Arvay, but Coleman neglects specific social realities which transform Seraph on the Suwanee far beyond the mythic model she is looking for. For example, in the story of Psyche, the males of Psyche's community withdraw from her because of her Goddess-like beauty, a situation which makes Psyche quite unhappy. In contrast, Arvay intentionally removes herself from the men of the community. Because Arvay is, in contrast, more in control of her universe, the aspect of sexual fear in her tale is far more profound than in the story of Psyche. Her idealistic, unreal love for the Preacher Carl Middleton is an indictment of this fear. Her hope for a marriage with Carl is more than a fear of sexual intimacy, it is also a hope that someone will love her as a

cerebral being rather than as merely a sexual being.

Under the scheme outlined by Neumann and accepted by Coleman, Psyche's story is the story of a woman growing to accept her womanly maturity. Both critics see the internal struggles of the main character as the feminine struggle against sexual maturity. Arvay's story is much more than just a psychosexual struggle, it is also a struggle with the social climate of the reconstructive South. Arvay's struggle is not only the struggle against her sexual fears, but also a struggle with the narrow definition of wife that accompanies marriage and the elaborate class struggle at work in the South.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

A review of secondary criticism which deals with Hurston's work reveals a desire to ignore or resolve the narrative and thematic tension within her canon. This criticism often fails because narrative and thematic tension in the work of Hurston are integral to the issue of cultural and gender differentiation explored in her novels. Most of this criticism involves the application of traditional mythic models to Hurston's work. This illustration of the critical predisposition for an ordered universe reflects the confusion and discomfort brought on by the intentional irresolution of Hurston's novels. Such criticism allows the subject of cultural tension in Hurston's work to be ignored or circumvented and quite often is merely a search for European values.

Much of the myth criticism applied to Hurston's work imposes its system of thought only by ignoring or suppressing certain disruptive effects inherent in the text. In practice, these readings often disregard crucial elements of literary texts which do not confirm or support their framework. It is, therefore, important to draw out these neglected effects to ascertain the function of reader response in such theoretical perspectives. Criticism should

not be read so much for its interpretive insight, but for the "symptoms of blindness that mark [its] conceptual limits" (Norris 23). Much myth criticism, in its strictest form, has become a type of shorthand which guarantees a stable center of meaning for all literary texts, and in doing so has become a formulaic comfort to critics who use it. To move past these limitations, we must begin to understand how such readings support Western values and standards of morality.

Literature, history, and even criticism are written from a cultural point of view which usually either supports or challenges the existing politics of power. Gayatri Spivak notes:

> It should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English. The role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored. (175)

This comment may be applied to almost any form of written text including literary criticism. Myth criticism maintains that beneath all surface varieties thrown up by various cultures there exist certain deep patterns which reveal

themselves to myth critics. In contrast, this study contends that the myths observed by various critics are more often an indication of what the individual critic is predestined by his/her own cultural bias to see than what might actually be present in the novel. Many critics overlook the overwhelming prevalence of both Western and male perspective inherent in their readings. The historical struggle for control of the access to basic needs, the struggle for power, and the evolution of culture have greatly changed the emphasis of the universal experience that myth critics such as Lupton posit.

Mary Katherine Wainwright observes that Hurston's work "measures the worth of the black community in its own terms and not, as much traditional black literature does, against the touchstones of white society's values" (234). However, this observation underestimates the impact of Western culture on non-European minorities in the United States. Success in the Western world is determined largely by one's ability to approximate Western behavior. The traces of Western myth in Hurston's work are an illustration of this fact. Hurston's characters and their narration are often caught between Western and non-Western axioms. Hurston's confrontation and revision of myths are, without question, a commentary on the difficulty of fusing these disparate

cultures. In essence, critical attempts to squeeze her work into a pre-existing Western mythic structure, reveal a "bad fit."

Although Their Eyes Were Watching God follows, generally speaking, a treatment of the journey motif, Mary Jane Lupton's study becomes somewhat absurd in its effort to link this novel with the Homeric hero of The Odyssey. Her focus on only the similarities between the narratives reveals an inability to understand the way in which the journey motif is transformed in Hurston's work by cultural and gender differentation. As Jennifer Jordon notes, Lupton is blinded by her desire to see Hurston's tale as "proof of female superiority and dominance in a Darwinian world" (109). This "blindness" prevents Lupton from considering the ramifications of such a narrow application of myth. The Homeric hero's journey is so gender specific that to accommodate Hurston's vision, the hero motif must be completely altered.

Although not nearly as problematic as Lupton's study, Ancilla Coleman's study of Seraph on the Suwanee also suffers from a desire to see Hurston's work as replicating traditional mythic models. Her study looks for similarities between the character of Arvay in Seraph on the Suwanee and the character of Psyche. This attempt to universalize the

novel normalizes the inherent cultural tension in Hurston's text by simply ignoring it.

In contrast, H. Nigel Thomas's account of the chain from folklore to fiction in African-American literature offers a reading of the African-American tradition of revision that Hurston uses in the entire body of her work. For example, Thomas notes:

> Black American poet Sterling Plumpp opines that the God black slaves prayed to was "the spirit of their ancestors, disguised as the Judaic God of the Old Testament and Christ, the Bleeding Lamb of the New Testament"....Thus the rituals of Christianity appealed to blacks, the mores did not....To the extent that it was to their ancestral spirits that they prayed, the slaves utilized Christian forms for the purpose of camouflage. (14-16)

What emerges from this "lying," as it has been called, is the slaves' ability to redefine what is forced on them and make it their own; the re-creation of a language which will belong specifically to them. Unfortunately, however eloquent Thomas is theoretically, he rarely delivers on this promise. In his comments on Hurston's Jonah's Gourd Vine, he notes Hurston's alteration of the Black Preacher folk model, but does not go on to explore such alterations. The

importance of revision is heralded in Thomas's prospectus, but never practiced in his readings of particular novels. Nonetheless, Thomas's reading does prove fruitful in understanding Hurston's use of typical conventions such as classical allusion and the use of stock characters. What becomes clear is that Hurston uses conventions in unconventional ways to create a language that expresses the tension between a concept of shared community values and the specifics of her personal vision.

The problem with much of current critical opinion regarding Hurston's canon is the attempt to ignore or standardize the cultural tension which is the very fabric and subject of her work. This tension should be used to engage critical opinion in subjects of cultural, gender, and class disparity rather than to erase such crucial subjects. Hurston's commitment to the irresolution of these issues is perhaps the most difficult but essential result of a reading that embraces narrative and thematic tension in her work.

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